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A Double Prelude on Melville's *Moby-Dick*: "Etymology" & "Extracts"

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Melville placed "Etymology" and "Extracts" at the opening of his novel for two reasons: to indicate indirectly the main theme of the work and to give, indirectly as well, some basic instructions to readers about how they must read the book in order to conceive its deeper meaning. I say "indirectly" because Melville carries into effect his intentions with ingenious literary devices that must be decoded.

For example, the Usher and the Sub-Sub-Librarian, the two ostensible heroes of the opening "Etymology" and "Extracts" chapters, are not strictly "persons." They are personifications of a formless and bodiless being that dwells in the flesh of every human. They are two theatrical masks that externalize the secret life and the unknown activity of this being which henceforth I will call "mind," without meaning what common language intends by this term.¹ The true protagonist is the "inostensible mind." Its role is that of its true self. This interpretation is the main theme of the two introductory chapters.

The features of both the Usher and the Sub-Sub-Librarian allude to and summarize the true characteristics of what I term the "inostensible mind." For example, the Usher's sticking to the etymology of only one word and the Sub-Sub-Librarian's sticking to the collection of literary quotations with only one theme indirectly refer to the monomania of this being, which is linguistic and literal and so exhausts its entire life and activity. The similarity of features between these twinned actors (Usher/Sub-Sub-Librarian) alludes to the double nature of the unseen protagonist who is self-destroyed by an incurable disease and is always hidden behind a deceptive mask.

The same doubleness applies to the author's instructions that are not given directly but incorporated in the two small stories of the first paragraphs as elements of their myths. For example, the title "Etymology" is not only a simple term that refers to the kind of work of the monomaniac Usher, but also a double hint that the secret theme of the Usher's discourse is the true logos (etymon-logos), the true nature of the mind.² At the same time, this theme is brought to prominence not by the literal meaning of this term, but by its etymology, a destructive process that breaks up the word "etymo-logy" in (two)

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pieces. In other words, the two extracts (etymon logos) come from the etymology of the term “etymology”—from its self-bisection (or its self-destruction)—and they reveal the subject of the Usher’s monomania, which is also the subject of Ahab’s monomania and the main theme of the entire work. One way for us to read this enigmatic book correctly is to break the words, as I have done with “etymology,” and try to see in the extracts signs or masks of their original root: reliefs of the true mind.

The same doubleness could be asserted for the term “extracts,” the title of the second chapter. It not only names the nature of the following quotations, but also implies the fragmentary constitution of the true mind (etymon-logos), of a being that is not unipartite but a double-natured and eternally incomplete “extract.” At least two extracts constitute etymology, not only because the concept “etymology” is a product of the combination of two extracts, but also and conversely because each etymology completes its work by breaking a word into (at least two) extracts. “Etymology,” either as a term or as an operation, cannot exist without these extracts.

The titles of both chapters are a double indirect testimony that the being called “mind” is not a complete concept but a double extract; and that this extract, which is the main protagonist in all the book’s lines and pages, is hidden in the words, paragraphs, and chapters.

The excerpt from Hackluyt in “Etymology” is another indirect instruction from the author concerning the creative role that this extract plays in the formation of the true meaning of the book’s words and ideas, as we will see analytically below.

When the author describes the entries in “Extracts” as “random allusions” (Longman *MD* 9), he also gives us an indirect instruction not simply to his anthology, but to his entire book, since the following quotations are certainly not “allusions,” but descriptions based on the literal meaning of the words.³ We can suppose that by the term “random allusions” he qualifies the main body of his book. His basic point is that his work does not use the literal sense as a way of expression, but unmethodical or random allusions, expressive means that are not based on established and known rules or traditional techniques.

Finally, although the author terms these extracts “higgledy-piggledy whale statements,” which must not be taken for a “veritable gospel cetology” (Longman *MD* 9), his purpose is indirectly to prepossess the reader towards the deeper meaning of his entire book: to indicate that his book is not a gospel cetology because its theme is not the physiology of the whale. Certainly it does not express a cheerful message like a veritable gospel.

The two introductory chapters in essence do not differ from the numbered ones of the novel. In both of them, hero (every person, that is) and

writer are disguises of the same double-natured and fragmentary being, of the “inostensible mind.” They differ only in the accuracy and completeness of their allusions. Both the Usher’s and Sub-Sub Librarian’s stories sum up and suggest the unseen functions of the “mind” in a more complete, evident, and spherical way. In this regard, the first two chapters are a synoptic introduction to the main theme of the book, which is steadily repeated like a main musical motif in all its pages.

The aim of these chapters is double, to incarnate and initiate: to incarnate the bizarre bodiless being that is at the same time the central hero and writer of the book, and simultaneously to initiate the reader into the secrets of the singular literature that it uses to manifest its bizarre soul, its true self. It seeks to orient the reader towards the singular techniques used by the bizarre, bodiless being that is the hero or the writer and to show the reader how to destroy the words and the phrases of the book and how to hear, in these ruins, what is buried beneath: that bizarre, bodiless being’s eternally creative and self-destructive soul. The two first chapters are a double prelude that serves not only the central idea of the work but all the expressive inventions of the writer as well. The allusions, hidden in the external form of these chapters, in the two small stories of the Usher and Sub-Sub-Librarian, and in their structural components—their words—serve these two ends.

The External Form of Both Chapters

It is well-known that the two 1851 editions of *Moby-Dick*, the English one published by Richard Bentley and the American one published by Harper & Brothers, differ substantially. A great difference is found in both of the preliminary chapters. In the British edition, they are placed at the end of the book as an appendix without peculiar layout. In the American edition, they are placed in the beginning of the book without numbering. “Etymology” is printed on two facing pages. On the left page appears the title “Etymology.” The subtitle (“Supplied by a Late Consumptive Usher to a Grammar School”) is placed under it and below is the one and only paragraph of the chapter refers to the personality and the work of the Usher. The text of this paragraph is original, written by some anonymous “ego,” the writer apparently, as the phrase “I see him now” implies. On the right page, we read again the title “Etymology” and further down are given the extracts from Hackluyt, Webster, and Richardson and the graphical representations of the concept “whale” in the various languages of the world. These texts are not original, but copies from other books. The copyist is not the writer but the Usher, as the subtitle of the chapter denotes.

The “Extracts” are printed like the chapter “Etymology.” On the left page, appears the title “Extracts.” The subtitle (“Supplied by a Sub-Sub-Librarian”) is placed under it, and further down the two and only paragraphs of the chapter refer to the personality, work, and life of the Sub-Sub-Librarian. The text of these two paragraphs is original as well, written also by some anonymous “ego,” the writer apparently, as the phrase “whose commentator I am” implies. On the right page, there is again the title “Extracts.” The texts of the extracts follow under it and take up this and the next thirteen pages. These extracts are not original, but copies from other books. The copyist is not the writer, but the Sub-Sub-Librarian, as the subtitle of the chapter implies.

In brief, the writer divided each chapter in two pieces; he placed a corresponding title above each piece and laid out the two pieces on facing pages. He placed the original text in the first piece and copies of texts in the second. This plan of the American edition is evidently a conception of Melville himself. The peculiarities, which characterize the layout of the text of the first two chapters, are not accidental typographical choices. The facing pages, the double titles, the two subtitles, the original text juxtaposed with extracts copying text from other works, the elusive presence of two litterateurs (I/Usher, I/Sub-Sub-Librarian), the one original paragraph of the first chapter (“Etymology”) paired with the two original paragraphs of the second chapter (“Extracts”): these two introductory chapters, which in substance are one chapter divided into two extracts, create visual allusions to the double texture of the book, reflecting not only the double nature of its true writer, but the relation between his two selves as well, the relation of the original to the copy.

An Autobiography of the Mind

The two stories of the Usher and the Sub-Sub-Librarian are not two realistic portraits, but two variations of one figurative story, which twice artfully conceals similar allusions. Its two heroes are two self-same idols, two self-same marionettes in the dexterous hands of an invisible being that externalizes all the features of its “soul” by them. The entire life of this formless being exhibits only one art, namely the construction of concepts and words, the “art of logos.” The Usher is a mask of the invisible “mind” that has fathomed its root/self, whereas the Sub-Sub-Librarian is a second mask of the “mind” that like a “grub-worm” (Longman *MD* 9) crawls on its pages. This double story is an inside autobiography whose aim is to enliven the basic characteristics of its true writer: its contradictory and tragic doubleness, literary monomania, unformed essence, self-destructive sickness, perpetual transitional state, and eternal disguised state.

The narrator of the Usher's story is a formless mind or an indefinite "I," which denotes its role by the phrase "I see him now" (Longman *MD* 7). This formless mind, which makes its presence felt by a metonymy, the pronoun "I," has two selves. It is double and contradictory by nature, because, although it has destroyed itself in order to be transubstantiated into the concept of "I," it has not been used up during the course of this self-destruction and transubstantiation. On the contrary, it has been held intact and self-same during its entire transformation—"formless" (and therefore unknown and imperceptible)—inside the concept of "I." It has been held intact and self-same because there is no other place for it to exist except its foetus-ego. Its life is its self-destruction and simultaneously its coexistence with its embryonic but always unborn and formless self. We can say that this metonymy or pronoun is an apt allusion to the double and contradictory nature of the being called "mind."

A second, similar allusion can be found in the self-evident relation of the two persons—of the formless "I" and the "Usher"—in "Etymology." The writer's mind is hidden behind this "I," and the seeming anthologist of the following quotations, the consumptive Usher, is its invention, a second fictitious mask of the same mind. "I" and "Usher" are two masks of the mind of Melville.

A similar construction applies to the Sub-Sub-Librarian. The narrator of his story, included in the two first paragraphs of the "Extracts," is also a formless being, an anonymous ego, which denotes its role by the phrase "whose commentator I am" (Longman *MD* 9). The writer's mind is hidden behind this "I" again. But there are two small dissimilarities between the ego of "Etymology" and the ego of "Extracts." The first is expressed by only one word, the personal pronoun "I," the second by two words—"I am"—that are tautological because both "I" and "I am" express the same internal experience, the awareness or meaning of existence. In addition, the first "I" appears bare, without features, while the second "I" is accompanied by an explanation clarifying that it is a simple commentator. The apparent anthologist of the following quotations, the sallow Sub-Sub-Librarian, is a second fictitious mask of this "I," another invention of the narrator or the writer. We face successive disunions. Narrator and writer, narrator and Usher, writer and Usher, narrator and Sub-Sub-Librarian, writer and Sub-Sub-Librarian are the two slightly different masks of the same impersonal being: of a formless being that we might call "Melville's mind."

This mind delineates its two hypostases. The first of these uses an elementary concept, a personal pronoun, an indefinite substitute of its identity and entity without any attribute, a bare "I" that is the simplest abstract concept and term of the English language. The second one, which is an invention of its own imagination, employs the term "Usher," a concept that means both assistant to a schoolmaster or headmaster and under-master or assistant

master. The choice of this term is not casual. It implies with great accuracy the double nature of the being hidden behind the mask of the “Usher.” It combines two innate concepts that exist in unbreakable interdependence, even though one of them is hidden in shade: a repetition of the double structure of “I.” The word “Usher” literally means “assistant teacher.” But in order to denote this meaning it must be united with the first one, schoolmaster or headmaster (even though this is not its literal meaning), because assistant to a schoolmaster presumes the existence of a master. As the writer’s “I” gives form to the “Usher,” although it stays in shade, so the “headmaster” brings into being his subordinate, though he also stays in shade. These two dark and secret persons, the writer and the headmaster (or teacher) are the true narrators. They give form to the concept of “Usher,” to a literary being produced by their coupling. The writer (Melville) was a schoolteacher; the Usher is his child and effigy.

Melville similarly delineates his two selves in “Extracts.” He uses the special expression “whose commentator I am” (Longman *MD* 9) to imply his one self. As we saw, the phrase “I am” is a double substitute of the formless and double-natured identity of the writer’s mind. As we will see later, the compound term “commentator” is a similar substitute and a simple repetition of the previous phrase “I am.”

For his second self, he uses the compound but mutilated term “Sub-Sub,” another substitute of “I am” and of “commentator.” This term is double-natured and ambiguous, not only because the double form—the repetition of the word “sub”—characterizes its external or graphical representation, but also because this abbreviation means the “substitute” and the “substituted subject” as well. This term implies both the “substitute” and the “substituted subject” at the same time because “substitute” cannot be thought without this secret “subject.” The term “sub” acts like the term “Usher”: in order to express the meaning of “substitute,” it couples with the secret meaning of the substituted “subject.” To turn our minds to these secret meanings (of “substitute” and “subject”), which the abbreviation “sub” implies, Melville mutilates the term Sub-Sub-Librarian, found only in the subtitle of the chapter, using an extract of it in the rest of the text, the mutilated double term “Sub-Sub.” Its main feature is its self-duplication. The term implies two similar beings in a condition of unbreakable conceptual interdependence, like the two conceptual roots of “I” (or “I am”), of the “commentator” and the “Usher.” It is a disguise of the terms “I am” and “commentator.” “Sub-Sub” is a pure invention of theirs, as the writer himself implies by his phrase “whose commentator I am,” which may be read “whose (Sub-Sub-Librarian) inventor I am.” An obsolete meaning of the word “commentator” is “inventor,” one who devises.

The commentator is also a double-natured substitute for the Sub-Sub-Librarian. The term “commentator” derives from the Latin verb “comment,” joining the words “con” or “cum” and “mens,”⁴ linking the concepts of “combination” and “mind.” Thus the commentator is a product of the combination of two minds or thoughts. Both the literal meaning of this term and the role that the commentator plays in the narrative indicate the same combination because “commentator” cannot be comprehended without “commented” (and the reverse). The commentator is a disguise, a substitute for the commented; he is the commented in a new form, the substitute for the Sub-Sub-Librarian.

Melville presents the Usher as a man who does not live anymore. His figure is a creature of his imagination, a recreated intellectual picture, a copy of an original buried in the depth of his conscience. He “see[s] him now” (Longman *MD* 7) as he remembers him. The substance of this recreated picture is self-destruction. Melville “sees” or re-minds the consumptive Usher dying slowly and knowing that he dies (his dusting of old grammars “reminded him of his mortality” [7]); the tuberculosis bacillus had destroyed his lungs. This tragic self-knowledge, the awareness that he was a living dead man, had consumed him. He had become “threadbare” in spirit (“heart” and “brain”) and frame (“body”); the exterior world “covering” him (“coat”) had been destroyed, too (7). The Usher was a man doubly destroyed, reduced to a pale shadow, turned into a tragic ghost, internally and externally ruined. He died slowly not like an animal, but knowing that he was dying and exactly because he knew it. This double awareness, this self-consciousness, was his great tragedy. His consciousness was not only worn out but also wore itself out, because the idea of death that it experienced consumed its life. Victim and destroyer were Usher’s double-natured consciousness. The ambiguous term “consumptive”—meaning, according to Webster, not only destroyed but also destructive—implies this internal self-destruction. The mind of the Usher, organically interwoven with death, is the incarnation of an experience (concept) that we could name “self-destruction.” However, what is strange is that we are not able to express this genuine and innate experience that is the “concept,” whose fate is to be perpetually reversed and shattered.

Melville presents his Sub-Sub in a similar manner. This hero, like the Usher, is a person without a face. The writer does not detail any of his characteristics. He presents him like a worm-eaten form suffering from a mortal illness. This Sub-Sub-Librarian is indeed dying: shortly he is to go up “there,” to the “seven-storied heavens” (Longman *MD* 9), where he will enjoy eternity. The writer takes leave of him with a stereotyped valediction, used when two beloved persons, two close friends separate. He says “fare thee well” (9) at the prospect of the Sub-Sub leaving this dismal and thankless world. The Sub-Sub

should not be sad, the writer continues, even though literature, the aim of all his life, did not make him happy and deprived him of every joy.

The shadow, hidden behind the two masks of the Usher and the Sub-Sub-Librarian, is a double-faced monomaniac writer. The literary is an innate attribute of his “soul.” The aim of his life is double: the etymological explanation of a word (Usher) and the research through literary texts of the past aiming at a periphrastic explanation of the same word (Sub-Sub). The sole aim and joy of his life is the literary explanation of his own self or its concept, since all his “self” is transfused into his concept. This effort is a tormenting monomania, not only because the mind is forced by fate to turn its attention to its concept, but also because every effort of the mind to explain its own concept is condemned to failure from the beginning and continues to spur its pathological obsession. This monomania is a circular motion and also purely conceptual or literary, as implied by the entries on “whale” quoted from the dictionaries of Webster and Richardson in “Etymology.”

Moreover, in its effort to explain its concept or self (to answer the inevitable question “who am I?”), the mind manages only to destroy its concept, to reveal its deficient self; to reverse, deny, and destroy every term, every mask that does not satisfy its demand; and at the same time to devise another false mask/concept, another substitute, and to wear this mask (that materializes its self-destruction again and is identified with its concept), since it cannot exist without this deficient substitute, without a mask, without a concept. However, this concept—eternal coffin and life preserver of the immortal self-destruction⁵—is a false substitute, not its authentic substance, which will be perpetually non-existent. The imperfect outlines in the portraits of both the Usher and the Sub-Sub and the similar diminutives “Usher” and “Sub-Sub-Librarian” are two allusions to its non-existence.

The eternal passage from one mask to another—from one concept to another—and this tragic, incomplete literary disguise produce infinite deficiency, short-lived masks of the mind’s primordial incompleteness, infinite words, infinite effigies, infinite idols of its one and only, ever-moving and therefore “ungraspable” (Longman *MD* 22) concept: the false literary or linguistic history of man, his brittle literary universal soul. The thirteen words collected from the different languages of the world, denoting “whale,” quoted by the Usher in his “Etymology,” do not ground his research. They do not etymologize the word “whale.” They are mere graphic and phonetic variants of the same concept. They are mere masks of the same being, collected “by many nations and generations” (9), just as the quotations in “Extracts.” This small anthology has a double meaning, implying not only the eternal self-destruction but also the eternal disguise of the mind that wanders about faceless in all the latitudes

and longitudes of the earth. All the words of all the world's languages are masks of one and only one concept, idols of the secret original concept of the “mind” that dwells invisible and undefinable in every corner of the universe.⁶

The Hints of the Writer: “Etymology”

The “whale” of the Usher is such an idol. An etymology of “whale” amounts to an anatomy of the invisible original that it reflects, an anatomy of the mind. The Usher's etymology aims to find not the grammatical root of the word “whale,” but the root of the original that this word reflects (as each word reflects): the beginning of the mind. The compound ancient Greek word “κῆτος,” which Melville uses as a flag in his novel (Longman MD 8), has a double meaning. It implies not only the central idea of the work but also the true method of discovery that this etymologist followed in his work.

“Etymology,” Noah Webster notices, “is that part of philology which explains the origin and derivation of words, with a view to ascertain their radical or primary signification,” their true root and original meaning.⁷ Having in view that each word is nothing but a mask of one and only concept, the “mind,” Melville and his Usher realized that “etymology” was the quest for the root or the true meaning of this concept. This intellectual process is carried out by the etymologist, or the etymon-logos, or what we call “mind” in its more pure condition. Hunter and game, or in the novel's terms Ahab and whale, are the same being, since what the mind etymologizes is an effigy of its own self.

Etymology's method is the analysis of a word, a breaking apart of that word, so that its original root or its original term (the “etymon”) can be found in one of its pieces (or extracts). The mind, in order to proceed in its soul searching, first has to analyze, to partition its compound concept. Etymology is not only a deep research, but also a destroying method, a solvent process. Without this self-partition, the etymon-logos cannot etymologize its concept: its name or self. From its self-etymology or self-partition, two extracts constitute its concept: the extract “etymon,” which means “true,” and the ambiguous extract “logos,” which indicates not only the word or the linguistic treatise, but also the thought.⁸ This fact means that the (unsatisfied) demand of the mind for the detection of its true root or its true meaning, hidden in its concept, is a product of its innate division or self-destruction. Etymology is a double mirror of this self-destructing process.

A key to the deeper meaning of *Moby-Dick* is the etymo(n)-logy of its words, their breaking and destruction, so that the “etymon-logos” can be found among the ruins. In an etymological analysis, the aim of breaking a word is to

locate its root (a lexical extract from which it is derived grammatically) in one of its pieces; the aim of breaking this book's words is to locate an extract among their ruins, to find an ontological origin. This extract is usually one, two, or more letters, with their own separate meanings or with a meaning from their combination referring to the indefinite concept of the "true mind." Examples include the English personal pronoun "I" or the phonological substitute "i" (ego); or the combination of the characters "eg-," "ig-," "-go," "og-," or "yg-," which are graphical or phonological extracts of the term "ego"; or a regular or obsolete type of the verb "be" (such as "am," "em," "ere," "art," "er," "are," "ard," "is," "es," "be," and "b"); or a phonemic substitute or an anagram (such as "ma" and "em"); or a regular or ancient type of the first or second person of the personal or possessive pronoun (I, me, my, mine, you, your, ye, thee, thou); or a phonological substitute for "them," a contracted form ("th," "the," "tho") or an anagram ("ma," "im," "em"). This technique, which Melville applied with subtle but steady perseverance and imperceptible adroitness, is not only a literary device, but also an imitation of the secret functions of mind. The words, products and effigies of the "true mind" produce their meaning, just as the "true mind" (falsely) lives, self-partitioned and reformatting its extracts. These extracts, either alone or combined with other extracts, imply the monotonous and insistent presence of the "true mind" in almost every word of the book, depending on the power and boldness of the reader's imagination.⁹

In his "Etymology," Melville quotes extracts from two distinguished lexicographers and etymologists of his time, Noah Webster and Charles Richardson, and also a strange extract from the writer and traveller, Richard Hackluyt, who is not an expert on issues of etymology. In this way, he recommends we go deep into his text. We need to discern the meanings hidden in the roots of his words and revealed through standard etymology—"ever dusting . . . old lexicons and old grammars" (Longman *Moby-Dick* 7) like the pale Usher and like Webster, and Richardson—and also uncover the secret meanings by extracting or setting apart (through our creative imagination) certain letters or phonemes in the book's vocabulary. Such an approach may be illegitimate from a philological point of view but authorized from a literary point of view. Citing Hackluyt on the letter H in the word "whale," taken from the entry for the word in Richardson's *Dictionary*, Melville emphasizes the creative role that the letter H, an extract, plays in the formation of the word "whale" and the creative role that this almost unvoiced but full of breath fragment plays in its animation. Although it is not heard, the letter H animates and gives stature to the word "whale." According to Hackluyt and Melville, if we remove the letter H from this word, the term "whale" is destroyed: "you deliver that which is not true" (Longman *Moby-Dick* 8).¹⁰

This sometimes legitimate and sometimes illegitimate double dive into these secret and undisclosed meanings, which undermines the strict sense of the narrative, has one purpose: to destroy the logic of language and the logical construction of the world, the false picture that human beings have preserved piously for centuries in the sepulchres of their various languages and in their “civilized hypocrisies and bland deceits” (Longman *Moby-Dick* 62). In these hidden meanings, Melville revealed the necessity and tragedy of a way of thinking that he considered as the only authentic and true one, however painful and extraordinary it might be.

Citing Hackluyt’s extract, Melville warns us indirectly that the secret of his book is hidden not in the word “whale,” which spouts on the surface of the book’s pages (and is an optical illusion), but in its unseen “lung,” the letter H, which breathes in the depths of its word/body, and which only can exhale all vivifying air from inside.¹¹ The secret is hidden in an interior element that breathes like a lung and is nothing but a simple concept, a concept beneath the word: that undefined, fleeting, plastic, and short-lived shadow that we have agreed to call “concept,” thinking that it is the most simple form of thought.

This shadow hidden behind any word, whose substance remains always (from word to word) the same, and which is simultaneously a complete and fragmentary transubstantiation of the mind itself, constitutes the axis and the “mighty theme” (Longman *MD* 401), not only of the two preliminary chapters but of the entire book. Open-minded Melville, browsing Richardson’s dictionary, chose the first phrase of the extract from Hackluyt because the traveller’s remarks about the value of the characteristic letter H in the formation of the meaning of the word “whale” could be used to imply analogically the value of the vivifying mind or its concept in the formation of any word. Like the monogrammatic vocal sound H, which, although it is full of the air of our lungs and gives hypostasis and meaning to the word “whale” by its exhalation, is not heard in its pronunciation, the unseen mind (or its concept), hidden behind any word, though it comprises its true root, is not perceptible in its formation. If we stay on the visible surface and cannot dive into this invisible root, we will never speak the truth about human beings and life. All truth is hidden in this soundless and insensible H.

A Subtleness of the Writer: “Extracts”

As the term “etymology” combines two words/extracts, the etymon-logos (“true mind”) is, as we have seen, a combination of two fragmentary concepts/extracts. The title of the second chapter, “Extracts,” indicates that the term defines the main structural element of both etymology

and etymon-logos (“true mind”) because neither their names nor their functions can exist without their connate extracts.

The form of the two preliminary chapters presents a second allusion to the meaning and to the role of extracts: they contribute to the structure of the mind, of authentic thought, and of authentic expression. The chapter “Etymology” is constructed like the chapter “Extracts”: each begins with a short passage about the story of a man (Usher or Sub-Sub Librarian) and then presents extracts from various books, three in the first chapter, eighty in the second. In “Etymology,” the writer quotes extracts from books that describe isolated features of the whale. In “Extracts,” the title does not characterize the subsequent quotations, but alludes to the fragmentary texts that describe the true characteristics of the being hidden under the mask of the whale.

The deep meaning of an extract is double, an incomplete idol in a mirror. For an extract to exist, an entire text (of a chapter or book) must pre-exist. The extract is taken from this original text. The extract is a piece extracted from a complete pattern, acquiring its own hypostasis of the same form and substance without removing or misquoting the original, something that reproduces the original like an idol reproduces a face in a mirror. It does not have substantial independence. It can exist conceptually only when the concept of the original pre-exists. Its nature is double: expressing an idea and the idea and echo of an original.

In his paired preliminary chapters, Melville, using the deep meaning of the “extract,” emphasizes the double and fragmentary nature of thought, the invisible root from which concepts are extracted (“Etymology”) and the archetypal tree from which ideas are extracted (“Extracts”). The only external difference between the two parts of this introductory chapter involves the kind of extracts they contain. “Etymology” comprises extracts that are the simplest forms of thought; “Extracts” comprises extracts that are developed forms of thought. “Etymology” treats the concepts as roots; “Extracts” treats the ideas as fruits or products of thought. I say “external” because there is no difference in essence between the source (original) and the product (extract), between something complete and something partial, between our thinking organ and its concepts, since the human “mind” and its concept are one and the same thing, because the mind/thinking can exist only through its concept and only as a concept. When that immaterial element that writhes in the depths of our being, when that element which we called “intellect,” “thinking,” “mind,” or “spirit” forms its concept or any concept, then its formless, plastic, and ethereal nature is transformed into the extracted and fragmentary mask of this concept. Then original and extract become or are one and the same thing. But this being/concept—that is double by birth, since its formlessness is the double product of its

immanent consciousness—keeps its previous shapeless wholeness or fragmentariness so that it is able to see and realize its bizarre transformation, its own complete or fragmentary metempsychosis, like an onlooker. This monstrous contradiction is the great riddle of life.

The large number of quotations in “Extracts” is another double allusion indicating that the novel is full of extracts hidden in its words and that it is a vast anthology, an extensive collection of the writer’s peculiar comments, based on unregistered or secret extracts from many unregistered or unknown books. Melville suggests that to understand the meaning of these enigmatic comments, we have to uncover the specific unregistered extracts from the books that he had in mind. Without finding Melville’s secret sources, we will not be able to understand his difficult allusions.

The Whale Allusions: A Novel Grammar

Although Melville wanted to, he did not attempt to write a theoretical essay on the true nature of the mind, as he conceived it.¹² He did not dare to confront the world with his bitter Truth. On the other hand, he had realized that such a study was vain, since what we call “mind” is substantially inapprehensible and indefinable, something intuitively perceptible only by its own self, but without a self-definition of its concept being possible, because this definition could arise by only one way, through concepts that would be indefinable idols and counterparts of its ungraspable concept. Realizing this tragic contradiction, this insuperable obstacle, Melville refused to tell lies. He confined himself to implying artistically that although this invisible being is a simple concept, by nature it is doomed not to define the substance of its own self.

The grammar of all human languages, dead and living, continues to follow an erroneous logic based on the false distinction between “subject” and “object.” Without this error, language could not and cannot exist. Based on this false distinction, humans (anyone, the scientist, the philosopher, and the simple person as well) have spoken, babbled, and in substance deluded themselves for centuries.¹³ They segregate an “object”—and their own selves, too, which they view as an “object”—and try to describe its form or deepen its substance, and they do not understand or suspect that this “object” is a simple concept, a shadowy copy, a formless counterpart of their restless minds, indefinable by nature and therefore lacking form and substance in human eyes. They do not suspect, too, that their language itself is an unavoidable falsehood.

Melville suggests this idea with a most elaborate phrase. “I have created the creative,” Lombardo whispers (NN *Mardi* 595), implying that, in completing

his book *Koztanza*, he externalized his own self, completing his spiritual autobiography because the expression “I have created” suggests “a creative I,” his creative mind/thinking itself. If the “I” or “mind” is “the creative,” when it creates the creative, it creates its own self. This complex phrase, one of the keys to Melville’s thought, contains a revealing tautology. The subject and verb of the sentence (“I have created”) are identified with its object (“the creative”); the object resembles a conceptual copy of the subject; what creates the creative ego is a copy of its own self. At the same time, this act abolishes the external, “objective” world, with the tragic implication that this world is a deceptive idol of the mind, the only true and the most suffocating jail. The phrase also implies the tragic division of the intellectual organ, which is self-divided, destroying its unity, so that one-half or a part is self-transformed into a mutilated, piecemeal, and deceptive effigy, and its other half or part, its whole and undivided function/thinking, observes its own contradictory division like an onlooker. Across his books, Melville, speaking of the “semi-intelligibles, the divided unities in unity” (NN *Mardi* 340) and the “dualities in unities” (NN *Mardi* 597), implies this “strange and complicate” division of the “human soul” (NN *Pierre* 176). These formulations are entirely different from the traditional exterior or objective dualism, the foundation of Aristotelian logic and established philosophical and literary language. In the dualism of ancient Greek philosophy, the “world” and “man” are viewed as self-existent objects.¹⁴

Melville knew that, if he wanted to continue being an honest man, he should be silent, like *Bartleby*. However, his creative mind chose another way, dangerous and rough. He wrote *Moby-Dick* following the same method as he did in *Mardi*. Abandoning the traditional literary methods, he returned to the new and great art that he had initiated in that earlier book, which had one purpose: to continually divulge (from word to word, from phrase to phrase) the Truth, an effort he described in “Hawthorne and His Mosses” as “the great Art of Telling the Truth” (NN *PT* 244).

Denying the value of the literal sense, Melville eagerly directed attention to allusion because its nature was simultaneously double and contradictory, like the nature of the mind: double, because it is not confined to the immediate (but dubious) meaning of its words, but aims at its secret connotation; contradictory, because it sets free a suppressed truth. He used grammar and syntax not to speak precisely but to set free the meanings of words, to set up a narration that should not speak literally, that should tell some things and mean different ones. Grammar and its logic were for him an old embroidery that he had to destroy by cutting, not by picking its threads.

His book had to be a mirror. Its writing had to reflect the true life (or function) of the mind. Realizing that this being, doomed to vegetate in the shadow,

unborn and incomplete, always makes its shadowy presence felt indirectly through concepts that are crystallised into words and combinations of words, realizing that these last signs—which are not “objects” from a syntactic point of view, but traces of an ethereal “subject”—are the only materials that can reflect its true features, he built his book with words exclusively, placing each close to the other almost without joints, abolishing grammar and syntax. He made a mosaic of innumerable tesserae without glue among the joints. But the self-existence of each word does not abolish the previous or the next one; on the contrary, each word cooperates with the adjacent one, initiating a new and magic combination. Their secret consists in the innuendoes of their hidden second meanings; in their obsolete meanings; in the meanings derived from their etymology and pseudo-etymology; in the meanings secretly formed by some graphic or phonemic extracts drawn from their bodies, either alone or combined; in the secret meanings formed by the anagrammatism of their letters; and in the meanings generated from their historical and mythological allusions.

A way of thinking that follows the footprints of traditional logic, like that of Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., for example, who sees the materiality of the world, or the human body, or others, or even its own self, as a self-existent object cannot trace the secret and true thinking of Melville. The same applies to the approach of Francesco Bigagli, who grounds his interpretation of *Bartleby* on the self-existence of the other, because, on a deeper level, Melville’s *Bartleby* is not another real person, but an unexpected, fictitious, and not self-existent ghost, extracted from the lawyer’s divided thought.

What Melville calls “Truth” in many of his writings is an unprecedented conception in the history of philosophy, “rejecting both the world’s knowledge and the philosopher’s knowledge” (Sealts 6; cf. Christodoulou 159–74). “Truth” cannot be taught or conveyed precisely through words. It is perceptible only by “an acute intuitional insight into human nature” (Sealts 6): “when a man is in a really profound mood, then all merely verbal or written profundities are unspeakably repulsive” (NN *Pierre* 207). Such a new and abysmal intuitional conception cannot be traced by the measures of an a priori theory of literary criticism. It is grasped in absolute concentration and seclusion. The first expression of Melvillean graspings at this “Truth,” which forms the foundation of this essay and is the fountain for all the subsequent works of Melville, is contained in *Mardi*, a “child of many prayers” (NN *Mardi* 601) that Melville begot before he met and knew Hawthorne. Beverly R. Voloshin’s thoughtful essay, examining a probable “Platonic link between Melville and Hawthorne” (Voloshin 21), would be more convincing if it had remained focused on the fact that Melville’s ideas were corroborated by his recognition of similar ideas in Hawthorne after their shared “Platonic banquet.”

Notes

¹ I use the terms “being” and “mind” as figures of speech in order to be able to speak. These terms have an entirely different meaning for Melville or more rightly they have not and cannot have a sense, because they indicate a “nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom” (Longman *Moby-Dick* 42).

² Etymon, “n. (Gr. *ετυμον*, from *ετυμος* true.) An original root, or primitive word” (Webster).

³ According to Webster, the term “allusion” comes from the Latin verb “alludo” (to make sport with) and means “a reference to something not explicitly mentioned, a suggestion by which something is applied or understood to belong to that which is not mentioned by means of some similitude that is perceived between them.” The extracts that the Sub-Sub cites should not be characterized as “allusions” in the terms of this definition.

⁴ The word “comment” derives from the Latin *commentor*, “to cast in the mind, to think, to devise, to compose; from *con* and *mens*, mind, or the same root” (Webster).

⁵ Cf. “A life-buoy of a coffin! Does it go further? Can it be that in some spiritual sense the coffin is, after all, but an immortality preserver!” (Longman *MD* 462).

⁶ In *Moby-Dick*, Melville offers a striking image of ubiquity: “One of the wild suggestings referred to, as at last coming to be linked with the White Whale in the minds of the superstitiously inclined, was the unearthly conceit that Moby Dick was ubiquitous; that he had actually been encountered in opposite latitudes at one and the same instant of time” (Longman *MD* 174).

⁷ Richardson notes that etymology is “the *true* origin of words, of the meaning of words . . . a discourse in which the reason or *cause of the noun or name* is explained.”

⁸ The second part of this term, the word *λόγος* (*logos*), had and has a double meaning for the Greeks (ancient and modern); it means not only the word or outward form by which the inward thought is expressed and made known but also the inward thought or reason itself. Cf. “*λόγος*, ὁ, (*λέγω*):—(A) *the word or outward form by which the inward thought is expressed and made known*; and, (B) *the inward thought or reason itself*; so that *λόγος* comprehends both the Lat. *ratio* and *oratio*” (Liddell/Scott).

⁹ Concerning creative power, Melville observes that “in a matter like this, subtlety appeals to subtlety, and without imagination no man can follow another into these halls” (Longman *MD* 182).

¹⁰ The entire quotation from Hackluyt in Richardson’s *Dictionary* reads as follows: “While you take in hand to schoole others, & to teach them by what name a *whale-fish* is to be called in our tongue, leauing out through ignorance the letter H. which almost alone maketh vp the signification of the worde, you deliuer that which is not true: for *val* in our language signifieth not a *whale*, but chusing or choice of the verb *Eg-vel*, that is to say, I chose, or I make choice. *Hackluyt. Voyages*, vol. i. p. 568.”

¹¹ Melville takes advantage of the peculiar characteristics of the letter H. Samuel Johnson, in his *Dictionary*, remarks that for many philologists this letter is not an alphabetic character: “H is in English, as in other languages, a note of aspiration, sounded only by a strong emission of the breath, without any conformation of the organs of speech, and is therefore by many grammarians accounted no letter. The h in English is scarcely ever mute at the beginning of a word, or where it immediately precedes a vowel; as house, behaviour: where it is followed by a consonant it has no sound, according to the present pronunciation.” Remembering the remark of Johnson and the characterization of Webster, who considers this letter a *sui generis* character, we understand why Melville chose the extract from Richard Hackluyt. Melville saw this symbol as an embodiment of the mind, of a *sui generis* being, which, though it is the root of all words and gives life to their meanings by its breath, still is not perceptible.

¹² In a letter to Hawthorne dated April 16, 1851, concerning his book *The House of the Seven Gables*, Melville writes: “We would say that, did circumstances permit, we should like nothing better than to devote an elaborate and careful paper to the full consideration and analysis of the purport and significance of what so strongly characterizes all of this author’s writings. There is a certain tragic phase of humanity which, in our opinion, was never more powerfully embodied than by Hawthorne. We mean the tragicalness of human thought in its own unbiassed, native, and profounder workings” (NN *Corres* 186). The expression “did circumstances permit” testifies to the insuperable social and expressive difficulties that Melville saw in such a project. The phrase explains the enigmatic language of this important letter and of his essay “Hawthorne and His Mosses.”

¹³Melville damned all philosophical theories and all sciences in *Moby-Dick*. Using Locke and Kant as models, he parodies the philosophical systems that afflicted men for centuries: “So, when on one side you hoist in Locke’s head, you go over that way; but now, on the other side, hoist in Kant’s and you come back again; but in very poor plight. Thus, some minds for ever keep trimming boat. Oh, ye foolish! Throw all these thunder-heads overboard, and then you will float light and right” (Longman *MD* 295). He expresses his distrust of all the sciences, declaring boldly that “physiognomy, like every other human science, is but a passing fable” (Longman *MD* 312).

¹⁴Lewes comments on both the dualism and objective bias of Greek philosophy: “dualism had been the universal creed of those who admitted any distinction between the world and its creator. Jupiter organizing Chaos, the God of Anaxagoras whose force is wasted in creation; the Demiurge (δημιουργός) of Plato, who conquers and regulates Matter and Motion; the immovable Thought of Aristotle: all these creeds were dualistic; and, indeed, to escape dualism was no easy task” (Lewes 210) and “Greek Philosophy . . . was . . . eminently *Objective*. Now what is the objective tendency but the tendency to transform our *conceptions* into *perceptions*—to project our ideas out of us, and then to look at them as images, or as entities?” (Lewes 64).

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